

Electing the House of Lords: the STV voting system fits the required criteria very well

Alan Renwick explores the proposals for reforming the House of Lords with a view to explaining the specific consequences of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system – arguing that it would be unlikely to bring the party domination seen in Australia.



The [parliamentary select committee](#) that has examined the government's proposals for reform of the House of Lords published its report on 23 April. They recommend using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) form of proportional representation. This system will give voters a choice between voting for individual candidates and for a single party ticket (see the [transcript](#) of their oral evidence session last December, when they quizzed Iain McLean and me on this subject). It is the form of STV used in many Australian elections, where voters can vote 'above the line' for a party or 'below the line' for individual candidates.

The [Electoral Reform Society](#) is crying foul over this. Calling the proposals a 'dog's breakfast', they say that STV with above-the-line voting will return power to the parties, rather than allowing voters to determine who gets elected.

What should dispassionate observers make of this? I think three questions need to be considered. First, how much power would the inclusion of a party voting option give to parties and to voters? Second, how much power *should* parties and voters have in determining which candidates are elected? Third, are there any other considerations that we should take into account before deciding whether we think that possibility of above-the-line voting should be welcomed?

STV systems with above-the-line voting are currently used only in Australia. The first such system was introduced for the Australian Senate elections 1984 and has been retained ever since. Similar systems have now been adopted for upper house elections in South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia, and Victoria. In most of these cases, voters can either vote for one party above the line or rank the candidates below the line. New South Wales now has a variant under which voters can either rank parties above the line or rank candidates below the line.

As the Electoral Reform Society points out, the proportion of voters in fact voting above the line in Australia is very high: as the following table shows, it was higher than 95 per cent in the most recent election in each of these jurisdictions. With such high ticket voting rates, it is virtually impossible for a candidate to be elected out of rank order. In fact, not one candidate has been elected out of rank order since above-the-line voting was introduced (I'm grateful to [Antony Green](#), Australia's leading elections expert, for confirming this by email). This means that Australia has, in effect, something very close to a closed-list proportional system.

Rates of above-the-line voting in recent Australian elections

Australian Commonwealth Senate (2010)	New South Wales Legislative Council (2011)	South Australia Legislative Council (2010)	Western Australia Legislative Council (2008)	Victoria Upper House (2010)
96.1%	97.8%	96.8%	96.1%	96.0%

Sources: *Australian Electoral Commission and relevant state electoral commissions.*

At the same time, the Electoral Reform Society is wrong to imply that we should expect the same pattern to apply here. In most of these Australian cases, if a voter chooses to vote below the line, she or he must rank *every* candidate – of whom there may be several dozen – in order to cast a valid vote. In the extreme case of [New South Wales in 1999](#), there were 264 candidates. This makes voting for individual candidates much more onerous than voting for a party ticket, so it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of voters choose the latter option.

In the UK, by contrast, a vote would be valid even if only one candidate preference were expressed, so the effort required to vote below the line would be no higher than that required to vote above the line. We can therefore expect more personal votes to be cast than in Australia.

But just how many more? The Australian evidence here isn't very useful. The most permissive Australian case is Victoria, where a valid below-the-line vote in state Upper House elections requires only five preferences. The table above suggests that this makes no difference to the number of personal votes cast. But we shouldn't infer too much from this. First, Victoria introduced this system only in 2006. Voters had become accustomed by then to voting above the line in Senate elections, and it is hardly surprising that they extended their habit to the new venue. Second, providing five preferences is still a lot more onerous than casting one party vote.

In terms of voter experience, the closest analogues to what the select committee has proposed for UK second chamber elections are not the Australian systems, but rather list proportional systems in which voters have the option, if they wish, to express one preference (or perhaps more) among individual candidates. These systems model much more closely the sort of choice that will be available to voters in the UK.

If we look at such systems, we find that the proportion of voters who actually exercise their right to express a preference varies hugely. [Uwe Kitzinger](#) found that in Austria in the 1950s fewer than 1 per cent did so. Today, as Lauri Karvonen (in [this book](#)) shows, around 20 per cent of Austrian voters do so, while around two thirds do so in Belgium and 90 per cent in Brazil. These cases paint a very different picture from the Australian evidence.

This wide variation makes it very difficult to predict what would happen in the UK. Given that British voters don't much like parties, have very little experience of voting for party tickets, and seem particularly to value independent-mindedness in the second chamber, it seems reasonable to expect that many would exercise a right to vote for individual candidates.

So what do I think?

In sum, then, we can say that, while allowing an above-the-line option makes total party domination possible, that is unlikely in the UK given the other rules proposed and the habits of voters. Nevertheless, above-the-line voting would almost certainly increase significantly the power of parties to determine which of their candidates are elected.

I argued in the Political Studies Association's [briefing paper on House of Lords reform](#) that STV was clearly the best system for electing a reformed second chamber. I wasn't trying in that paper to push a particular perspective, but this particular point seemed quite uncontroversial. A proportional system is needed to make it hard for any one party to secure a majority – a goal that virtually everyone agrees on. And if independence is valued – both the relative independence of party representatives from the party whip and the presence of independents who take no party whip – then STV is superior to any list-based form of PR.

This remains my view. Above-the-line voting would be unlikely to bring the party domination seen in Australia, but it would nevertheless enhance the power of parties in a way that is not clearly justified. It might give some voters an option that they would value, but it would also increase the dangers of confusion. I make no claims for STV across the board: for first chamber elections in parliamentary systems, it carries significant dangers. For the proposed elected second chamber in the UK, however, it fits the criteria that most people want very well.

This is an shortened version of an article that [first appeared](#) on the [University of Reading Politics Blog](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the [British Politics and Policy](#) blog, nor of the [London School of Economics](#). Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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